



Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor

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Kentucky Employee Assistance Program

(502) 564-5788 or (800) 445-5327

■ **I manage my employees' performance problems by doing everything I can to help them improve. If that fails, I refer them to the EAP. Sometimes they are willing to attend, and sometimes not. Is this a proper use of the EAP?**

**You are using** the EAP properly to address job performance issues, but using it sooner rather than later has advantages you should consider. Don't see the EAP as a last resort or final step. A recommendation by the supervisor to use the EAP only after other approaches can be resisted by troubled employees who see the supervisor as an adversary in the struggle over unsatisfactory performance. This dynamic can lead the employee to shrug off your recommendation to use the EAP. At that point, disciplinary action held in abeyance with the option of EAP attendance and cooperation may be the only way to succeed. Try to avoid reaching this stage, however, because you risk turnover and loss of the worker, which is a pricey outcome if the employee is highly skilled. Instead, begin mentioning the EAP at the first sign of deteriorating performance. You'll have more personal influence early on and less resistance later if a formal referral becomes necessary.

■ **I have an employee who does not measure up to the performance standards of others on our team. Can you suggest ways to facilitate improvements that I may not have considered before I recommend the EAP? Note, that we are very stressed and under-resourced.**

**Your team gives** you an advantage for helping your employee improve performance. First review the workload. Some employees in resource-stressed organizations often fool themselves into thinking they can manage heavy workloads and take whatever is thrown their way without asking for help. Make sure the workload is balanced among team members. Are you rotating assignments among them? If not, cross-train, and then swap duties and gauge what happens. Some employees excel at one type of work more than another. Rotate job assignments; this employee may surprise you by demonstrating a range of skills. Don't pigeonhole the employee because you assume he or she has just one narrow area of expertise. Also, try pairing up teammates. Ask an outstanding team member to mentor a poor performer for a few weeks. This is a practical way to evaluate skill deficits and problems. Even though you are not ready to refer, still consult with the EAP during this evaluation period. You'll gain insight and be better prepared to refer the employee to the EAP when that becomes necessary.

■ **How do I know whether an employee's behavior reflects mental illness to the point of needing a**

**You will not** be able to make a determination of mental illness in your official capacity as a supervisor. Getting too focused on whether your employee is mentally ill will lead to a delay in taking appropriate action. In an extreme situation, this could create a hazard for others. If you witness

psychiatrist or professional counselor? And should I refer to the EAP first or seek a fitness-for-duty certification?

unsafe behavior that interferes with the workplace or jeopardizes a safe work environment, or if you see behavior that in your judgment indicates the employee is unable to perform essential duties safely, then follow your organization's fitness-for-duty policy or the guidance provided by your human resources representative. An EAP referral may also be appropriate in tandem with this step, but safety issues take priority over the success of an EAP referral, which can come later.

■ **I have two employees who are in continuous conflict. I'm fed up with lecturing them, so I am making a formal supervisor referral. Should I meet with them together and refer them to the EAP as a pair, or should I meet with them separately and refer them individually?**

**Meet with your** employees separately, and refer each individually to the EAP.

There may come a point in time when the EAP recommends they meet together in a session, but beginning this process with separate appointments and assessments will make subsequent meetings more productive and resolving differences more likely. The reverse of this process is cumbersome for the EAP, because it creates a disadvantage by affording less insight into the dynamics and real issues. When coworkers are in conflict, visible and not-so-visible issues exist that fuel the conflict. These may be personal, psychological, or even outside the awareness of one or both parties. Either way, the issues can't be easily identified without a confidential, individual interview that allows the EAP to examine each employee's view of the conflict, what caused it, why it is perpetuated, and how it might be resolved.

■ **What's the most significant problem in the workplace that inhibits productivity, causes conflicts between workers and managers, and creates the most risk for employees and the organization?**

**The answer is poor** workplace communication. Because nothing happens without communication, and because every dimension of an organization's mission depends on communication, it will always be the single most important influencer of productivity or lack of it. We are not talking about just sending and receiving messages. There is no end to getting communication right, but here's a hint: Think "barriers." There are many types of barriers that affect every possible type of workplace communication. For an example of how veiled these barriers can be in one area alone, consider new hires. Upon hiring new workers, you should always provide a performance plan that describes the most important duties in detail and how they should be completed. It sounds simple, but EAPs commonly receive this surprisingly common complaint from employees: "I don't know what they want me to do." Or, "No one has given me a job description." Imagine the conflict, misunderstanding, anger, and productivity issues that this communication barrier creates.

## NOTES